United Nations A/54/221

General Assembly

Distr.: General
20 August 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session
Item 125 of the provisional agenda*
Pattern of conferences

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Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The utilization rate of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi has increased in recent years, mostly as a result of the success of the Office in attracting to Nairobi meetings of environment-related treaty bodies. A drastic change in the utilization pattern is unlikely, however, as long as there are only two Nairobi-based United Nations bodies, neither of which has a heavy meetings programme, and other bodies entitled to meet away from their headquarters do not meet regularly at the Office. In addition, the concept of making the increased utilization of facilities at the Office dependent on their use by non-United Nations entities requires consideration as a policy matter.

* A/54/150.

99-23869 (E) 250899

I. Background

1. In paragraphs 17 and 18 of its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly expressed concern that the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi were still underutilized, as recorded during the period 1996–1997, and reiterated its call for better utilization of those facilities. In paragraph 21 of the same resolution, the Assembly invited all subsidiary bodies of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Commission on Human Settlements, and encouraged Member States, intergovernmental bodies and regional and other major groupings, to consider increasing their use of the conference facilities at Nairobi and, in paragraph 22, it reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to assist the aforementioned bodies in improving that situation and requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, on the actions taken to that end. The present report is submitted pursuant to that request.

2. In paragraph 31 of the above-mentioned resolution, the Assembly requested that a report on the subject, which had been presented orally to the Committee on Conferences at its substantive session held from 1 to 9 September 1998, be circulated. That report was subsequently issued as document A/53/827 and, as agreed by the Fifth Committee when it adopted the resolution, contained updated information to that presented orally to the Committee on Conferences. The Fifth Committee did not consider the updated report but the General Assembly took note of it in its decision 53/470 of 7 April 1999. The present report contains information on developments subsequent to the issuance of A/53/827.

II. Meetings activity at the United Nations Office at Nairobi in 1999

A. Meetings of United Nations bodies with headquarters at Nairobi

3. Only two United Nations bodies have Nairobi as their headquarters: the Commission on Human Settlements and the Governing Council of UNEP. These organs follow a biennial meeting cycle, in which both hold regular sessions in odd-numbered years. Accordingly, the Governing Council held its twentieth session from 1 to 5 February 1999 and the Commission met in seventeenth session from 5 to 14 May. Neither of these bodies held pre-session consultations nor scheduled a resumed session, as they have done on previous occasions. In addition, the Governing Council of UNEP held its first shortened regular session, in the light of its decision 19/32 of 4 April 1997, by which it established the inter-sessional High-level Committee of Ministers and Officials and reduced its subsequent regular sessions by five days. Consequently, the number of meetings generated in 1999 by the sessions of the Nairobi-based calendar bodies was relatively low compared to 1997, 20 as opposed to 84.

4. The High-level Committee of Ministers and Officials of the Governing Council of UNEP, which has held annual three-day or four-day meetings, is the only established subsidiary of a Nairobi-based body. While the High-level Committee met at Nairobi in 1998, it is now seeking the approval of the Committee on Conferences to hold its 1999 meeting at Bonn, in conjunction with the high-level segment of the fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, scheduled to take place in that city from 25 October to 5 November 1999. The High-level Committee's request to meet away from its headquarters location is being made in accordance with decision 19/32 of the Governing Council, which, in operative paragraph (e), after stating that "the High-level Committee of Ministers and Officials shall meet at least once a year at Nairobi", allows for meetings of the Committee to be "convened elsewhere by its Chairperson, in consultation with its Bureau, in connection with major international environmental meetings".

5. The Commission on Human Settlements, acting as the Preparatory Committee for the special session of the General Assembly for an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, held an organizational session on 13 and 14 May 1999.

B. Other United Nations meetings

6. Other United Nations meetings held or planned at the United Nations Office at Nairobi in 1999 and requiring the provision of conference services included the following, all organized by secretariat units at Nairobi: a thematic workshop on a greenhouse gas inventory (19–21 January); a special meeting of African experts on biosafety (28–29 January); a meeting on intellectual property protection and the Convention on Biological Diversity (6–7 February); a preparatory meeting on the elaboration of national reports on the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (22–23 February); a regional ministerial meeting on the implementation of the Habitat

Agenda in Africa (4–5 May); a meeting related to the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (18–21 May); a workshop on the economic valuation of biological diversity for the African region (14–18 June); an expert consultation on biosafety protocol in the context of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (23–24 August); two meetings convened under the aegis of the Environment Information System (on training and education in sub-Saharan Africa, 6–8 September, and on best practices in sub-Saharan Africa, 9–11 September); a meeting of the Network of African Environmental Lawyers (13–15 September); a meeting of African non-governmental organizations and UNEP (20–22 September); the eighth session of the African Ministerial Conference of the Environment (27 September–1 October); a global workshop on vulnerability index and adaptation (1–9 October); a workshop to review the handbook of implementation of the biodiversity and related conventions (11–14 October); and a workshop on freshwater resources in sub-Saharan Africa (26–30 October).

7. In a welcome development in terms of encouraging increased utilization of conference facilities at the Office, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat has requested services at Nairobi for the fifth expert group meeting on financial issues of Agenda 21, to be held from 1 to 3 December 1999. Some 70 participants are expected at this meeting, which is not intergovernmental and is financed from an extrabudgetary trust fund.

C. United Nations system and environment-related meetings

8. The United Nations Office at Nairobi has continued its efforts to attract to Nairobi meetings convened by agencies of the United Nations system or by environment-related intergovernmental or expert groups, to which services are provided on a reimbursable basis. For 1999, these include the second session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on persistent organic pollutants (25–29 January); a regional conference on best practices, convened by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (8–10 February); a briefing session on the Convention to Combat Desertification, convened by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (18–19 March); a meeting on the Lake Tanganyika biodiversity project, convened by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (25–28 May); a workshop on water resources management in Africa, organized by the World Bank (26–29 May); a meeting on the Africa Court of Women in Search of a New Kind of Justice, convened by UNIFEM (27–31 July); the inaugural meeting of the African Evaluation Association, sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (13–17 September); and the third World Conference on Sport and Environment (dates to be decided).

9. In addition, UNDP convened from 15 to 17 March a preliminary meeting on the upcoming special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the outcome of the World Social Summit for Social Development and further initiatives.

10. Assuming that, in 1999, the meetings of the committee of permanent representatives at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, and their subcommittees and working groups, and those of the related regional and other major groupings of Member States will follow a pattern similar to that of 1998, some 300 meetings of intergovernmental and expert groups will have been held at Nairobi in 1999. Of these, 20 are meetings of calendar bodies, with the remaining 280 comprising meetings of intergovernmental and expert groups, related both to the United Nations and to other organizations. Of the total meetings held at Nairobi, 200 will have been provided with interpretation services in two or more languages.

11. The total figure cited above reflects an increase of 108 per cent in the level of meetings activity at Nairobi, compared to 1998 when 144 meetings were held there. On the basis of the same formula used in the previous report of the Secretary-General on this question (A/53/827), the utilization rate of conference facilities at Nairobi can be estimated for 1999 at 20 per cent, the highest to date, up from 9.33 per cent in 1998.

D. Meetings serviced at other locations by Conference Services at Nairobi

12. In addition to the above-mentioned meetings convened at Nairobi, Conference Services at Nairobi will, in 1999, have serviced (on a reimbursable basis) 16 sessions of environment-related treaty bodies at other locations. These include: six sessions of bodies linked to the Convention on Biological Diversity (two at Cartagena, Colombia, and four at Montreal); a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Multilateral Ozone Fund at Montreal; two sessions of bodies convened by the Ozone secretariat at Geneva and Beijing; the sixth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Prior Informed Consent to the Rotterdam Convention, in Rome; a meeting of the Conference of the

Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species at Cape Town; and meetings of the Bureau and of the Conference of the Parties to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, at Basel; and expert and intergovernmental meetings on persistent organic pollutants, at Vienna and Geneva.

13. While Conference Services at Nairobi is assuming responsibility for servicing an increasing number of meetings of environment-related treaty bodies at other locations, the fact that approximately one half of those meetings are held away from the headquarters of the treaty bodies concerned points to a potential for attracting a larger share of this activity to Nairobi.

III. Meetings activity at the United Nations Office at Nairobi in 2000

14. Their biennial cycle would preclude either of the two Nairobi-based calendar bodies from holding a regular session in 2000 and, to date, neither has scheduled a special session. The High-level Committee of Ministers and Officials of the Governing Council of UNEP, however, can be expected to meet at Nairobi in 2000. The only other United Nations meeting planned for Nairobi at present is the first substantive session of the preparatory committee for the special session of the General Assembly to review the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, scheduled from 2 to 4 May.

15. On the other hand, several environment-related treaty bodies have scheduled major meetings at Nairobi in 2000. To date, these include the eleventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (11–20 April); the sixteenth International Panel on Climate Change (27 April–5 May); a meeting of the bureaux of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (14 May); and the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, which will be hosted by the Government of Kenya from 15 to 26 May.

IV. Conclusions

16. Although there has been a marked increase in the utilization rate of conference facilities at Nairobi in recent years, meeting-room capacity at the United Nations Office at Nairobi remains underutilized to a considerable degree. It is important to recall in this connection that there is no underutilization of meetings servicing capacity, that is, of staff resources at Nairobi, as the staffing levels in Conference Services at Nairobi are commensurate with actual workloads and are consistently fully employed. It follows that any more substantial and accelerated increase in the utilization of conference rooms for fully serviced meetings would bring about a need for increased staff resources.

17. The major reason for the underutilization of conference facilities at Nairobi is that only two calendar bodies, both with a relatively light programme of meetings, have Nairobi as their headquarters. Unless these circumstances change, or other United Nations bodies entitled to meet away from their established headquarters make it a practice to meet regularly at Nairobi, it is unlikely that the utilization rate of conference facilities there will increase dramatically.

18. The Secretariat, and in particular Conference Services at Nairobi, has actively sought to attract other meetings to Nairobi, and will continue to do so. Its success in persuading environment-related treaty bodies to hold their sessions at Nairobi is demonstrated by the information provided above. Still, it has to be noted that in these efforts they must compete not only with the headquarters of those bodies but with States parties offering to host meetings and, while the United Nations Office at Nairobi can offer its facilities and services to the secretariats of the bodies concerned, ultimately decisions on venue are taken by the States parties.

19. As noted in previous reports, the argument has been made that the absence of a permanent interpretation capacity at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, which increases the cost of holding meetings there, is an impediment to its greater utilization as a conference centre. In the case of treaty bodies, however, this is only partly applicable. Since these bodies do not have interpretation and other conference services at their headquarter locations, the provision of such services at any venue involves travel and subsistence expenses. Cost advantages or disadvantages, therefore, will be determined by the greater or lesser availability of local freelance staff at the venue selected, or the arrangements offered by host authorities.

20. As also indicated above, the Secretariat has been considering the possibility of developing a remote interpretation capability which, *inter alia*, could counter the argument about the cost of providing interpretation at Nairobi. If the method under development proves to be acceptable in terms of quality of service, and more cost-effective than on-site interpretation, meetings at Nairobi

could be serviced remotely from a duty station with permanent interpretation capacity. The current status of the development of remote interpretation is discussed in a separate report to the General Assembly (A/54/176).

21. The possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi is also discussed in a separate report to the General Assembly at its current session. At present, the programme of meetings of calendar bodies at Nairobi does not appear to provide practical justification for the establishment of such a service. Given the level of meeting activity at Nairobi, interpreters based at Nairobi would remain productive only if they were assigned for a substantial part of the year to other duty stations, at a cost higher than that of freelance staff.

22. The objective of reducing the cost of interpretation at Nairobi has been approached mostly as a way of making the United Nations Office at Nairobi a more attractive venue, in terms of cost, for non-United Nations meetings which are serviced on a reimbursable basis. (The low level of meeting activity of the Nairobi-based calendar bodies is unrelated to cost considerations.) This leads inevitably to a policy question on which the Secretariat requires the guidance of Member States: whether the satisfactory utilization rate of a United Nations conference centre should be made contingent upon its use by non-United Nations entities.